

Good intentions But let's not relax OHLAP rules

Oklahoman Editorial

NO doubt Rep. David Braddock, D-Altus, had the best intentions when he decided the state's premier college scholarship program should be opened to many adoptive children regardless of financial need. But good intentions don't always make for good public policy.

The beauty of the Oklahoma Higher Learning Access Program is that it mixes need and merit so that deserving, hardworking students are the main beneficiaries. Students must keep up their grades, take college-preparatory courses, stay out of trouble and come from a family with an annual income of less than \$50,000. So far, OHLAP students have shown themselves to be more likely to stay in school and graduate when compared with their peers and need less remediation.

We have urged the Legislature to come up with a permanent funding source for the popular program. Gov. Brad Henry has offered one idea — dedicating 1.25 percent of state income tax receipts — and we're eager to hear others. About 15,000 students are receiving OHLAP scholarships. We expect that number will continue to grow, burdening the state with an even bigger college assistance bill.

We're grateful to Oklahoma families who choose to adopt. But in choosing to do so, those families have agreed to bear the financial burden of raising the child or children although some receive limited financial assistance. That includes any educational expenses.

Braddock has said he thinks eliminating the income requirement will be an incentive for families to adopt children out of state or tribal custody. That's a bit of a stretch. Many of the children in state custody suffer from a wide array of problems, ranging from medical to psychological, which must be addressed before college even becomes part of the conversation.

More obvious is that exempting adopted children from the income limit is simply unfair. If the exemption is approved, the bill still would provoke questions of inequity. Should families who adopt a teenager get the same break as those who adopted infants and spent far more on child-rearing? The idea is fraught with potential problems.

Expanding the program in any way until a dedicated funding source is approved is irresponsible. And even when that day comes, diluting the merit-need qualification combination for adoptees just isn't a good idea.